



POISONS a history

FWIS 108 Spring 2021 | Dr. Lan A. Li, LL@rice.edu

MWF 4-4:55pm

POISONS

A Cultural History of Deadly Things

FWIS 108 901

Rice University | Dr. Lan A. Li

Spring 2019 | LL@rice.edu

MWF 4:00-4:55pm | ZOOM

Office Hours: Thursdays 2-4pm | whereby.com/LL-office

Regardless of your field, communication will be a vital aspect of your education and of your career after graduation. This course will help you to develop the writing and speaking skills that are an important foundation of strong communication, and thus an important foundation of university study in general. During the semester, we will focus on the following goals:

- Enhance understanding of the central place of writing and communication in the learning process and in academic life.
- Learn strategies for analyzing, synthesizing, and responding to college-level readings.
- Improve ability to communicate correctly and effectively in writing and in speech, taking into account audience and purpose.
- Become comfortable with writing as a process and learn strategies—for instance, prewriting, outlining, and revision-- for working through that process.
- Learn appropriate use of the work of others and, where necessary, specific practices of citation.
- Learn to articulate oral arguments and to respond productively to arguments of others in formal presentations and in class discussion.

Of course, in order to write we must have something to write about. To that end, this course will take poisons as its primary site of inquiry.

Introducing Poisons

Poisons aren't what they seem. Sometimes they look like food. Sometimes they look like drugs. From cinnabar to cinnamon, from dragon blood to goat bezoars, poisons result from careful human construction, collection, and creation. They are objects of early chemistry. Far from killing us, poisons have been central to the history of medicine. Physicians in the past and present monitor dosage, drug combination, and drug preparation to mitigate poison toxicity while still maintaining drugs' therapeutic potencies. Knowledge about poisons, in other words, quietly undergirds most of human civilization. Poisons are what keep us alive. Or not.

This class comes to understand poisons in three ways. First, it takes on individual poisons (mercury, opium, among others) to introduce major themes in the history of science and science studies. Second, it engages with global perspectives in the history of medicine to understand how poisons were deployed, refined, and neutralized around the world. Third, it introduces frameworks in the philosophy of chemistry to analyze the social, conceptual, and practical demands on empiricism. Together, these three perspectives will shift students' perspectives on poisons from objects that kill to critiquing them as objects that are intimately tied to ideas of cure.

Grade Distribution

ASSIGNMENTS	%
Essay #1 "The Foods"	10%
Essay #2 "The Response"	15%
Essay #3 "The Bottle"	15%
Essay #4 "The Paper Trails" - Final	15%
Essay #4 "The Paper Trails" – Outline & Annotated Bibliography	5%
Essay #5 "The Feelings"	15%
Peer Reviews	10%
Oral Presentation #1	5%
Oral Presentation #2	5%
Engagement	5%
	Total: 100%

A+ 98–100%
A 94–97%
A- 90–93%

B+ 89–87%
B 84–86%
B- 80–83%

C+ 79–77%
C 74–76%
C- 70–73%

D+ 69–67%
D 64–66%
D- 60–63%

F 59% or below

Attendance & Participation

Time Zones: All students who live **four or fewer** time zones away, are expected to attend every class synchronously, either in person or via Zoom. All students who are living where the time zone is **greater** than 4 hours from the central time zone are expected to either attend class synchronously via Zoom or to work out in advance with the instructor a suitable solution for asynchronous attendance.

Showing Up: Students attending class synchronously via Zoom are expected to arrive to class on time (e.g., within 5 minutes of start time). This is essential because links/docs posted in the Chat window and are only available to students who are present at the time the links are posted. *Links will not be reposted to accommodate students who arrive late.*

Zoom Etiquette: Students are expected to be actively engaged in the classroom. To facilitate discussion, please keep your cameras on. If you are unable to turn on your camera, leave a note in the Zoom chat and be sure to actively participate during discussion. Students needing an accommodation for using their camera or microphone should contact the instructor at the beginning of the semester to discuss and work out needed adjustments.

Required Texts

The following readings will be provided to you on Canvas.

Strunk, William, and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style Illustrated*. 4th ed. Penguin Books, 2007.

Bian, He. *Know Your Remedies: Pharmacy and Culture in Early Modern China*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

Rankin, Alisha. *The Poison Trials: Wonder Drugs, Experiment, and the Battle for Authority in Renaissance Science*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Smith, Matthew. *Another Person's Poison: A History of Food Allergy*. Columbia University Press, 2015.

ORAL PRESENTATIONS

5-minutes 5-slides

For Presenters: During the semester, you will be assigned two oral presentations. These presentations are meant to demonstrate a close reading of the assigned text. Your presentations are meant to be succinct in the form of five slides in five minutes. A discussant will time your presentation. You are welcome to write a 500-word script to read as part of your presentation. Limit your remarks in each slide, focusing on one example or briefly listing up to three notes. Make the most of your time, but **do not** rush. Here is the recommended format:

- **Slide 1 “Overview”** – Provide some basic information, including the name of the author and their background. If a previous presenter has already introduced the author, offer any additional information, such as notes on the author’s training, teaching, research, or publications.
- **Side 2 “Summary”** – What is thesis? What do you think is the main argument? You can provide a quote that captures the main point and briefly discuss what you find compelling about it.
- **Slide 3 “Structure”** – What is the stricture of this part of the chapter or article? How does the author support their argument? Here, you can include a specific example that you found compelling, or highlight They Say/I Say patterns.
- **Slide 4 “Footnotes”** – Read the footnotes. Is there anything interesting here? Does the author include any additional commentary? What do you notice about their use of sources?
- **Slide 5 “Questions”** – Are you left with any additional questions, methodological, historical, or otherwise? Are there any sources that you think are missing? Any additional questions left unanswered? Any other ideas that you find compelling?

For Discussants: Each presentation will be assigned a discussant to keep track of time and to offer additional comments. This can include feedback on the presenter’s observations, discussions of particular points that the discussant found interesting, or an attempt to answer some of the presenter's questions. As a ground rule, everyone should read closely and contribute to the discussion during class.\

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

Throughout the semester, you will be tasked with composing five essays of varying styles and lengths. You will begin with a diagnostic essay in a personal narrative style before engaging with shorts essays based on secondary and primary source analysis. Next, you will focus on outlining and drafting an original research essay. Based on your research, you will end the semester with an essay in a historical fiction style. The range of essay styles will train you in becoming a discerning reader and a dynamic writer. Though they vary in length, they each involve different demands on conceptualization and execution.

Assignment #1. The Foods.

Prompt: Write about an experience with a food item. This can be your favorite thing to eat—Captain Crunch, your mom’s dumplings, mangosteens. Discuss the tactile experience with it, such as its texture, taste, or the memories that you associate with it. As much as you love this food item, have you also had a negative experience with it? There are no rules here, no restrictions on narrative, no demands on structure, but you will receive comments based on the clarity of writing and communication.

Length: 2 pages (500 words)

Type: Diagnostic Essay

Due: 2/5 on Canvas before midnight

Assignment #2. The Response.

Prompt: Select one reading that we have covered in class and compose a response. What are the more significant questions that motivate the text? Do you find these motivations compelling? Who is the author writing for or arguing against? What is their argument, and how do they support it? How do they use their sources to support their argument? Rather than being a book report, summarize the readings and pair summary with analysis. Are you left with further questions?

Length: 3 pages (750 words)

Type: Literature review

Due: 2/19 on Canvas before midnight

Assignment #3. The Bottle.

Prompt: Select a primary source and offer a close reading. Your source can be a historical image of a kind of “poison,” such as an arsenic bottle, an opium case, or an illustration of cinnabar. Identify the content and context of a primary source. Then discuss what you observe from the image, the meaning of the objects, words, and symbols associated with it, or what you can infer from a particular historical event or time period. Include here any additional questions that remain. You are welcome to speculate a bit here. How might have this object been used? What else can you infer from the image? Ensure that you properly cite the primary source and any other additional sources that might inform your writing.

Length: 2 pages (500 words)

Type: Primary Source Analysis

Due: 3/5 on Canvas before midnight

Assignment #4. The Paper Trails.

Prompt: Write an original research paper on the cultural/social/political/embodied history of a "poison" of your choice. You may use the readings that we have covered so far as inspiration for your paper. You are also welcome to explore a history of foods that can turn poisonous or induce anaphylactic shocks. Maintain a clear idea of the kind of history you intend to write, the sources you would need to compose it, and your composition's overall direction. Your paper must have a clear thesis and structure. Citations must appear in either MLA or Chicago format. You must engage with at least three secondary sources. Proofread your work before submitting it in. [Peer reviews should be completed and posted on Canvas per the due date indicated in the syllabus. Late submissions will be penalized according to the Late Submission Policy.](#)

Length: 7 pages (1750 words)

Type: Research Paper

Due: 3/24 on Canvas before midnight (Outline & Annotated Bibliography)

Due: 4/9 on Canvas before midnight (Final)

Assignment #5. The Feelings.

Prompt: Based on your research, develop a historical vignette of an experience with a "poison." The narrative can be based on a primary source or derived from an account in a secondary source. As you plan this essay, consider when the event is happening, who it is happening to, where they might have acquired their materials, what things might have smelled or tasted like, what the drug might be used for. Are you presenting an account of selfcare, revenge, or simple experimentation? This essay can be composed in first person or second person.

Length: 2 pages (500 words)

Type: Historical Fiction

Due: 4/30 on Canvas before midnight

Guidelines for Written Work

All written assignments must be submitted as a Word document on Canvas before midnight of the due date. They should be double-spaced, written in 12-point font (preferably Times New Roman), and have 1-inch margins. They should contain your name, the date, an insightful title, and a correctly-formatted works cited page. If any of these conditions are not met, your grade on the assignment will be diminished by at least a third of a letter (i.e. from a B+ to a B).

Late Policy

Three Days: You are allowed a total of three days of extension to be applied across the semester as you wish. For instance, you can use one day for each assignment, or three days for one assignment. The day ends at midnight Central Time; all assignments submitted in the next calendar date will be considered a day late. These include the components of the discussion, Final Project, and peer reviews. Should you require an extension beyond the three days, please request one in person or by email **at least two days before** the assignment is due. If you request an extension the day before the work is due or on the day it is

due, there must be extenuating circumstances (i.e. illness or a family emergency) or your grade will be reduced by a third for each extra day (A to A-, B+ to B, etc).

Revisions/Rewrite Policy

You have the option to revise Assignments #2, #3, or #4 for the opportunity to receive a higher grade. If you choose to revise an essay:

- You must notify me in writing (via email) within 24 hours of receiving your original grade
- You must schedule a meeting with me to discuss your essay revision plans.
- You must schedule a consultation with a CAPC consultant to get extra support on your revision. Appointments fill up so do this as soon as you decide to revise.
- Revisions for Assignments #2 and #3 are due on Canvas one week after the original assignment is returned; revisions for Assignment #4 are due on Canvas two weeks after the original assignment is returned. I will not accept revisions after this point.
- Please hand back the original graded essay along with your CAPC consultation attendance sheet in class the day your revision is due.
- I will not accept revisions if you have not discussed your revision plan with me.

Please note that a completed revision does not guarantee a higher grade. It is possible to earn a lower grade. Do not undertake a revision if you do not have time to do it thoroughly! Revisions will result in an average between your two grades.

Academic Integrity: Rice Honor Code

This course encourages collaboration and peer-editing, but ALL WORK needs to be YOUR OWN WORK! Direct quotes need to be properly cited and referenced. You are all held to the standards of the Rice Honor Code, which you pledged to honor when you matriculated at this institution. If you are unfamiliar with the details of this code and how it is administered, you should consult the Honor System Handbook at <http://honor.rice.edu/honor-system-handbook/> Failure to properly cite all incorporated material is plagiarism, WHICH IS VERY BAD.

Office Hours

I encourage you to attend my office hours. You might use this time to ask questions about course assignments, discuss lingering questions you may have about the readings, seek help with strategies for close reading and participation, discuss connections between course material and your world, or get help connecting with campus support services. If you live in a time zone that makes it difficult to attend the weekly posted office hours, email the instructor to make an appointment.

Waiting Room: If you enter the Whereby chat when another student is in the room, you will be directed to a waiting room.

Course Resources

Reading Tips

Read before you come to class. Readings provide a shared foundation for our discussions. The materials for this course include work by anthropologists, historians, cultural theorists and philosophers. Please bring the readings to class so that we can refer to specific passages in the texts. It is highly recommended that you start reading early for weeks with heavy reading loads. Recommended readings provide additional context and theorization related to the week's theme, but there is no expectation that you will read these texts during the term. If you have any concerns about the readings, please do not hesitate to come to office hours.

Take notes (in the margins or in a separate notebook) while you read, as well as in class, as this will help you process the materials. Some questions to consider while reading:

1. What are the conditions of production of this text? (historical, geographical, etc.)
2. What are the author's central arguments or main points?
3. What evidence does the author use to support their argument?
4. What ideas or authors are being argued against?
5. What assumptions does the author rely on to make their argument?
6. Do you find the author's argument convincing? Why or why not?
7. What surprised you about the reading? What did you learn?
8. What experiences in your life, or in your research, resonate with the reading?

Safe & Health Protocol

Please be safe during COVID times and follow to the best of your ability the protocol established by your colleges if you are living on campus, or general Rice policies when you enter campus. If you need any additional health resources, please visit <https://coronavirus.rice.edu/health-resources>

Disability Resource Center

If you have a documented disability or other condition that may affect academic performance you should: 1) make sure this documentation is on file with the Disability Resource Center (Allen Center, Room 111 / adarice@rice.edu / x5841) to determine the accommodations you need; and 2) talk with me on the **first week of classes** to discuss your accommodation needs.

Technology Resources

Students attending remotely must have a working computer with a video camera, speaker and a microphone, and a working internet connection that allows them to be on video. Please test your equipment before joining class. If you have any concerns about meeting this requirement, please contact the Dean of Undergraduates. You can also request support via the Access and Opportunity Portal ([HTTPS://AOP.RICE.EDU/APPLICATION](https://aop.rice.edu/application)). Equipment can also be borrowed from the Digital Media Commons].

Privacy

In line with **FERPA REQUIREMENTS**, recorded classroom discussions involving students will be available only to students officially registered and enrolled in the class. If you have concerns about appearing on these recordings, please contact the instructor ahead of time.

Some instructors may desire or plan to use recordings from this class for another purpose. In such situations, and in line with **FERPA REQUIREMENTS**, the instructor may ask students to consider signing individualized consent **FORMS**. Students who do not provide written consent must be de-identified and/or omitted from all recordings.

Title IX Responsible Employee Notification

Rice University is a diverse community guided by the values of responsibility, integrity, community, and excellence. These values can only thrive in an environment that is free from sexual harassment and sexual misconduct. Rice is committed to maintaining and strengthening educational, working and living environments where students, faculty, staff, and visitors are free from sexual harassment or misconduct of any kind. *As the instructor and a responsible employee, I am required by Title IX to disclose all incidents of non-consensual interpersonal behaviors to the Title IX Coordinator on campus.*

- <https://safe.rice.edu/>
- <https://policy.rice.edu/828>

Writing Support

Throughout the semester, you will be required to schedule a consultation with the Writing and Communication program, please check out their resources here: <https://pwc.rice.edu/center-academic-and-professional-communication>

Additional writing resources include: *MLA Handbook*; Purdue Writing Lab (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>)

COURSE SCHEDULE

PART 1

The Basics, or, Will This Really Kill Me?

WEEK 1. HISTORIES are poisons all that bad?

1/25 Welcome to Poisons

1/27 **Read:** McDaniel, Caleb. "How to Read for History."
<http://wcaleb.org/blog/how-to-read>

1/29 **Read:** Patwardhan, Bhushan, Ashok D. B. Vaidya, and Mukund Chorghade. "Ayurveda and Natural Products Drug Discovery." *Current Science* 86, no. 6 (2004): 789–99.

WEEK 2. READINGS are you the drug?

2/1 **Read:** Alter, J. S. "Heaps of Health, Metaphysical Fitness: Ayurveda and the Ontology of Good Health in Medical Anthropology." *Current Anthropology* 40 Suppl (February 1999): S43–S56.

2/3 **Read:** Lentz, Carola. "Culture: The Making, Unmaking and Remaking of an Anthropological Concept." *Zeitschrift Für Ethnologie* 142, no. 2 (2017): 181–193.

2/5 **Read:** Lentz, Carola. "Culture: The Making, Unmaking and Remaking of an Anthropological Concept." *Zeitschrift Für Ethnologie* 142, no. 2 (2017): 193–204.

Due: Assignment #1. The Foods.
Bring your drafts to class

WEEK 3. REVIEWS

what is the history of medicine?

2/8 **Read:** Cook, Harold J. "The History of Medicine and the Scientific Revolution." *Isis; an International Review Devoted to the History of Science and Its Cultural Influences* 102, no. 1 (March 2011): 102–8.

Discuss: Assignment #1

2/10 **Read:** Bian, He. *Know Your Remedies: Pharmacy and Culture in Early Modern China*. Princeton University Press, 2020, 1-9.

2/12 **Read:** Bian, He. *Know Your Remedies: Pharmacy and Culture in Early Modern China*. Princeton University Press, 2020, 9-19.

WEEK 4. ACTORS

what if I eat this grasshopper?

2/15 **Read:** Bian, He. "Eating Exotica." *Know Your Remedies: Pharmacy and Culture in Early Modern China*. Princeton University Press, 2020, 153-165

2/17 **SPRINKLE DAY**

2/19 **Read:** Bian, He. "Eating Exotica." *Know Your Remedies: Pharmacy and Culture in Early Modern China*. Princeton University Press, 2020, 165-178

Due: Assignment #2. The Response.

Bring your drafts to class

PART 2

The Field, or, How Do I Know What Works?

WEEK 5. ARGUMENTS

is that poison in the air?

- 2/22 **Read:** Mukharji, Projit. "The 'Cholera Cloud' in the Nineteenth-Century 'British World': History of an Object-Without-an-Essence." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 86 (December 17, 2012): 303–317.
- 2/24 **Read:** Mukharji, Projit. "The 'Cholera Cloud' in the Nineteenth-Century 'British World': History of an Object-Without-an-Essence." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 86 (December 17, 2012): 317–332.
- 2/26 **Review:** bring one popular essay (newspaper, literary magazine, blog post) that reviews a vaccine in a particular pandemic. Be prepared to discuss the essay's argument structure, use of evidence, and engagement with history.

WEEK 6. SOURCES

who invents the cure?

3/1 SPRINKLE DAY

- 3/3 **Read:** Rankin, Alisha. "Caravati's Oil." *The Poison Trials: Wonder Drugs, Experiment, and the Battle for Authority in Renaissance Science*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 1–10.
- 3/5 **Read:** Rankin, Alisha. "Caravati's Oil." *The Poison Trials: Wonder Drugs, Experiment, and the Battle for Authority in Renaissance Science*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 10–19.

Due: Assignment #3. The Bottle.

WEEK 7. CITATIONS

how do the dead speak?

- 3/8 **Read:** Rankin, Alisha. "Poison on Trial: Theriac." *The Poison Trials: Wonder Drugs, Experiment, and the Battle for Authority in Renaissance Science*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 23-31.
- 3/10 **Read:** Rankin, Alisha. "Poison on Trial: Theriac." *The Poison Trials: Wonder Drugs, Experiment, and the Battle for Authority in Renaissance Science*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 31-40.
- 3/12 **Read:** Rankin, Alisha. "Poison on Trial: Theriac." *The Poison Trials: Wonder Drugs, Experiment, and the Battle for Authority in Renaissance Science*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 40-50.

WEEK 8. IMAGES

you keep that in your pocket?

- 3/15 **Read:** Rankin, Alisha. "Powerful and Artful Substances: The Bezoar Stone." *The Poison Trials: Wonder Drugs, Experiment, and the Battle for Authority in Renaissance Science*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 145- 158.
- 3/17 **Read:** Rankin, Alisha. "Powerful and Artful Substances: The Bezoar Stone." *The Poison Trials: Wonder Drugs, Experiment, and the Battle for Authority in Renaissance Science*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 158-170.
- 3/19 **Read:** Rankin, Alisha. "Powerful and Artful Substances: The Bezoar Stone." *The Poison Trials: Wonder Drugs, Experiment, and the Battle for Authority in Renaissance Science*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 170-182.

WEEK 9. METHODOLOGIES

another elixir?

- 3/22 **Read:** Li, Lan A. "Numbing Aesthetics: Taste and Tempers of Peppercorn / Mountain Pepper / Sanshō." *Gastronomica* 20, no. 4 (November 1, 2020): 64-74.
- 3/24 **NO CLASS. MEETINGS #1**
Due: Assignment #4. The Paper Trails. Outline & Annotated Bibliography
- 3/26 **SPRINKLE DAY**

PART 3

Enough! How Do I Make My Own?

WEEK 10. GENRES

do murder mysteries count?

- 3/29 **Read:** Emsley, John. "Mad Cats and Mad Hatters: Accidental Mercury Poisoning." *The Elements of Murder: A History of Poison*. Oxford University Press, 2006, 47-59.
- 3/31 **Read:** Emsley, John. "Antimony: The Great Cure-all." *The Elements of Murder: A History of Poison*. Oxford University Press, 2006, 197-208.
- 4/2 **Read:** Emsley, John. "The Empire of Lead" *The Elements of Murder: A History of Poison*. Oxford University Press, 2006, 261-174.

Due: Peer Reviews for Outlines

WEEK 11. THEORIES

how do the smallest things have so much power?

- 4/5 **Read:** Paxson, Heather. "Microbiopolitics." *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 158-167
- 4/7 **Read:** Paxson, Heather. "Microbiopolitics." *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 167-176
- 4/9 **Read:** Paxson, Heather. "Microbiopolitics." *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 176-186

Due: Assignment #4. The Paper Trails.

WEEK 12. CROSSOVERS

is it in my head?

- 4/12 **Read:** Smith, Matthew. "Introduction: 'Witchcraft, a fad, or a racket?'" *Another Person's Poison: A History of Food Allergy*. Columbia University Press, 2015, 1-17.
- 4/14 **Read:** Smith, Matthew. "Panic? Or the Pantry?" *Another Person's Poison: A History of Food Allergy*. Columbia University Press, 2015, 97-107.
- 4/16 **NO CLASS, MEETINGS #2**
Due: Paper Trails, Peer Review

WEEK 13. DETAILS

what is that you smell?

- 4/19 **Read:** Smith, Matthew. "The Problem with Peanuts." *Another Person's Poison: A History of Food Allergy*. Columbia University Press, 2015, **153-165**.
- 4/21 **Read:** Smith, Matthew. "The Problem with Peanuts." *Another Person's Poison: A History of Food Allergy*. Columbia University Press, 2015, **165-178**.
- 4/23 **Read:** Smith, Matthew. "The Problem with Peanuts." *Another Person's Poison: A History of Food Allergy*. Columbia University Press, 2015, **178-186**.

WEEK 14. ENDINGS

I feel fine.

- 4/26 **Read:** Larkan, Fiona, Brian Van Wyk, Jamie Saris, Brian van Wyck, and A. Jamie. "Of Remedies and Poisons: Recreational Use of Antiretroviral Drugs in the Social Imagination of South African Carers." *African Sociological Review / Revue Africaine de Sociologie* 14, no. 2 (2010): 62-73.
- 4/28 **Read:** Bian, He. "Epilogue." *Know Your Remedies: Pharmacy and Culture in Early Modern China*. Princeton University Press, 2020, 179-184.
- 4/30 **Wrap Up**
Due: Assignment #5. The Feelings.